

THE STUDY OF MAN

THE VICTIM'S IMAGE OF THE ANTI-SEMITES

The Danger of Stereotyping the Adversary

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ONE of the major handicaps in combatting anti-Semitism is the tendency to create in the mind's eye a single, simple, and unchanging type who represents The Anti-Semite. In this respect, Jewish thinking is often in danger of becoming as stereotyped as that of the anti-Semites, with their image of The Jew. This is unfortunate. For if we are to fight anti-Semitism effectively, the struggle must be

BRUNO BETTELHEIM is perhaps most widely known for his extraordinary study of the adaptation of the human mind and spirit to the stresses of concentration camp life, "Behavior in Extreme Situations," which appeared originally in the *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*. Reprinted in the magazine *Politics*, and then in pamphlet form, it evoked international comment. He here contributes another original and suggestive analysis of an important phase of the problem of anti-Semitism. Dr. Bettelheim was born and educated in Vienna, Austria, receiving his doctorate from the University of Vienna. After the annexation of Austria, he spent a year in a German concentration camp, during which time he collected some of the material drawn upon for this article on the stereotype of the anti-Semite. Dr. Bettelheim came to America in 1939. He did educational research in Chicago from 1939 to 1942 and later became head of the department of psychology at Rockford College from 1942 to 1944. In 1944 he was appointed principal of the Orthogenic School of the University of Chicago and assistant professor of education. He is at present working on the problem of education for abnormal children. Dr. Bettelheim has published articles in various professional journals.

based on the realities of human character and behavior, rather than on fictitious group stereotypes. It must concern itself with the living *individuals* on both sides of the fence, seen fully as human beings, and not as stock figures in a melodrama or a cartoon.

It is natural and inevitable that students of racial prejudice approach their subject with something less than pure objectivity. Outraged at the injustice suffered by the persecuted, they do not want him to appear in any but the best light. It seems somehow unfair to evaluate the mechanisms at work in the persecuted as soberly as those at work in the persecutor. However, it is doubtful whether in the long run such sympathetic bias is of real service to the persecuted. His main interest is that the persecution cease—and this can only be brought about by comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of persecution, a phenomenon in which persecutor and persecuted are inseparably interlocked.

A dramatic illustration of how stereotypes confuse thinking and action is provided by the experience of a man I knew in Buchenwald. As it happened, this man, whom I shall call N., was a trained psychologist, capable of observing the mental processes at work with substantial objectivity.

IT WAS at the time when the Jewish youth, Grynszpan, assassinated the German diplomat Ernst vom Rath in Paris, in November 1938. This event provided the pretext for

an even harsher regime for Jewish prisoners. One of the new orders excluded Jews from treatment at the camp clinic except when they had been injured while working for the SS. The services of the clinic were of doubtful value, since it was staffed by untrained orderlies; still, such as it was, it often represented the difference between life and death.

In the fall and winter of that year many prisoners suffered from frostbite. The Jews were worse off than the others because they were not allowed to work indoors. In many cases, chilblains led to gangrene, and amputations became necessary. So, despite the order, many Jewish prisoners tried to get their frostbite treated. They had to explain their cases to an SS private who had the power to admit or exclude them from the clinic. Even before the new rule barred them, very few Jews had succeeded in gaining admittance. All Jews were prejudged as malingerers, and suspected malingerers were sent away with a whipping.

N., too, suffered from severe frostbite, and prisoners with medical experience warned him that if his hands were not treated soon, they would have to be amputated. Convinced beforehand of the near-hopelessness of the attempt, he went one day to join the line in front of the clinic.

As the prisoners discussed among themselves the chances of receiving treatment, N. was struck by the fact that most of them had worked out in detail a plan of action which, they hoped, would get them into the clinic. Some intended to stress their service in the First World War, their wounds and decorations; others planned to impress the guard with the seriousness of their cases; still others, to invent some lie—for instance, that a Gestapo officer had ordered them to report for treatment. They tried to convince themselves that the SS man would not be clever enough to see through their stories.

When N. was asked about his plan, he truthfully replied that he had none, and that he saw little use in fabricating one. He would watch the behavior of the particular guard—especially the way he handled

the other prisoners—and act upon such cues as offered themselves. A preconceived plan seemed impractical, since it took no account of the individual guard's personality and prejudices. His fellow prisoners responded in an entirely unfavorable way, even to the point of violent and insulting aggressiveness. They accused him of having some subtle plan of his own that he did not want to reveal, or else of eavesdropping on their conversation so as to steal the most plausible excuse for himself.

Most of the twenty-odd prisoners who preceded N. were turned away, though many had extreme cases of frostbite. The more they pleaded with the SS guard, the more vicious he became. Complaints of suffering amused him and stories of military service aroused his anger. From the way the guard talked and acted, it became obvious to N. that his mind was saturated with the typical Nazi stereotypes about Jews, and that attempts to sway him only put his back up. N. also observed that though he was cruel, he was not unusually sadistic for an SS man—he did no more than kick the prisoners he sent away. Moreover, he seemed somewhat more intelligent than the average of his kind.

When N.'s turn came, he told the guard that he had come not to ask for treatment, but simply to inform the clinic that he could not work with his hands in their present shape. He concluded by asking if it were possible to have his hands freed of the dead flesh hanging from them; since prisoners were not allowed to possess scissors or knives, he could not do this himself. He spoke in as matter-of-fact a tone as he was able.

The SS man answered that if that was all there was to it, he would tear the flesh away himself. He began to pull at the festering flesh, while N. successfully suppressed cries of pain. After a short time, finding it impossible to pull the flesh loose, the SS man gave up the job and ordered N. into the clinic.

MY PURPOSE in relating this incident is not to press home any trite moral

about the Spartan virtues. Rather, it is to point out the fact that N. was successful because he broke through the cast of the traditional stereotypes, both of the oppressor and the oppressed. The SS man had been taught that all Jews were cowards and cheats who took advantage of Gentiles by deceit. He therefore expected them to try to wheedle their way into the clinic by devious means. Thus the obviously prepared stories of the prisoners confirmed his expectations. He probably realized that he was less intelligent than many of the prisoners, and the cleverness of their stories only enraged him the more. This cleverness was a threat to his ego, and he had to demonstrate that their intellectual superiority was futile. N.'s behavior in this situation did not put the SS man on the defensive through a show of superior intelligence. By making the unexpected claim that he wished to be helped to work, he forced the SS man to abandon thinking in stereotypes and to evaluate the situation in a new light. Since N.'s behavior, moreover, showed that he possessed the same "heroic" virtues professed by the SS, in rejecting N. the guard would have rejected his own scale of values.

Despite the unusual character of N.'s experience, we can learn a great deal from it about the crippling role that stereotypes can play—and not only in situations of life and death, but in many more "normal" forms of relations between Jews and anti-Semites.

The Jewish prisoners waiting in front of the camp hospital were thinking of *the* SS man in terms of a stereotype for more deeply emotional reasons than those basic to most stereotyped thinking. Stereotypes arise usually as simplifications of thought processes, serve as time savers. But the prisoners had no need to save time. They had plenty of free time, and if any subject remained perennially an interesting topic for thought, it was anti-Semitism and the SS. If anything, they thought too much about these problems and were carried away beyond reality by the sheer pressure of their thoughts—and their fears. The violent hostility displayed by the other prisoners to N.'s lack of a plan pro-

vides something of a clue to the psychological mechanism at work. The prisoners obtained a certain amount of security and emotional relief from their elaborate schemes for outwitting the SS guard (who, to them, represented all SS men). An attitude questioning the validity of their stereotyped picture of *the* SS guard terrified them, by casting doubt on the success of their carefully-laid plans. Without such plans they felt themselves nakedly exposed, without defensive armor; undernourished and exhausted as they were, they were not capable of the flexible spontaneity that non-stereotyped thinking demands.

THE Jewish stereotype of the SS fulfilled other important functions, besides cushioning against anxiety. For instance, it safeguarded the Jews' self-esteem. The stereotyped picture contained, among other features, the idea that the anti-Semite was of low intelligence, had little education, and was of low social and cultural status. If these characteristics could be ascribed to all anti-Semites their accusations against the Jews could be easily dismissed. What a stupid or depraved person thinks can be disregarded. But, in fact, in the concentration camp it *could not* be disregarded. And this raised a new problem—answered by a new stereotype.

In the concentration camp the Jew was at the mercy of the SS. It is damaging to one's ego to have to humble one's self; even more pernicious to one's self-esteem is having to grovel before a person of inferior social background and of other very undesirable characteristics to boot. The Jews, therefore, found themselves confronted with a dilemma. Either the SS were at least their equals, for instance, in intelligence; or else the SS were stupid and the Jews had to see themselves as submissive to their inferiors. In order to preserve their inner self-respect, the Jews could not admit to submitting to their inferiors, especially since many of the latter's requests were unreasonable and amoral.

The Jews found a way to solve this conflict by thinking of the SS as superior not

intellectually or morally, but superior in some other way. They thought of them as *all-powerful* adversaries *physically*, and pretended that they were no longer human beings. The Jews could admit, without losing self-respect, that they were unable to fight against super-human brutality or an all-powerful conspiracy.

At Buchenwald the personal contacts between Jews and SS men were frequent, but not of the sort to give the Jews a real understanding of their enemy. In order to understand them, the prisoners had to fall back on their own previous experience, and into the stereotype of the SS they projected most, if not all, of the unpleasant motives and characteristics they had ever known or heard of. By investing this stereotype with everything evil, they made it into an even more powerful and threatening figure—a veritable ogre—crueller, more bloodthirsty, and more wicked than the majority of even SS men ever could have been. Many SS men were indeed very callous and dangerous, and most of them were cruel, but only a small minority were actually bloodthirsty—in spite of the fact that any one of them was willing to spill blood without hesitation when he thought his superiors expected him to. But the stereotype of the SS man was always and under all circumstances that of the blood-lusting killer.

The result was that on many occasions prisoners were more terrified of a guard than was either justified or necessary. They avoided contact with the guards at any cost and by doing so ran greater risks than would have been the case had they not acted in this fashion. Some prisoners were so frightened that when ordered to present themselves to an SS guard they went into hiding. They were severely punished for this, and sometimes even shot. In most cases, the punishment would not have been so bad had they not run away.

A strange effect of the prisoners' attitude was that even those who committed suicide did not first try to kill an SS man. Such attempts might have brought punishment on the rest of the prisoners, but this reason

was hardly the deterrent factor. Even in the extermination camps, non-suicidal prisoners who knew that they were going to the gas chamber still did not try to attack the Gestapo. Such an attack probably would have resulted in a less painful death for them and would have offered a chance for revenge. The prisoners certainly knew that they could not be any the worse off for assaulting a guard. The reason the victims did not dare to fight back was probably that they, like the prisoners in the concentration camp, were trapped by their own stereotype of the all-powerful SS. Their mental picture of the SS was such that even to think of fighting back became impossible; to have done so would have robbed the stereotype of its omnipotent features, which alone made submission to an "inferior" acceptable to the prisoners' egos. Their submissiveness was in line with the unreal, delusional character of the whole situation which did not permit them to fight back, because by fighting back the prisoners would have introduced reality into an unreal situation. The myth of the all-powerful SS had to be preserved.

Still another aspect of their stereotype of the SS man served to protect the ego of the Jewish prisoners. Their self-esteem, naturally, did not permit them to accept the idea that the SS really considered them sub-human, as Nazi propaganda would have it. Therefore, the prisoners interpreted their persecution as evidence of the fear in which they were held by the SS. They convinced themselves that there must have been something special about them to make the SS so afraid. Hardly ever did a Jewish prisoner realize that he was continually contradicting himself—declaring on the one hand that all Gestapo men were stupid, and, on the other, citing the fears of these allegedly stupid people as evidence of his own superiority.

THE most appalling consequences of Jewish efforts to protect their self-love against the debasement inherent in persecution can be observed in some pathological developments in persons who survived the

extermination camps. In my own clinical experience I have seen, for instance, two such cases. One of them was a girl, aged sixteen. After her liberation, she was brought to this country and placed in a nice foster home. She identified her foster mother with a Gestapo agent. She insisted that her real mother had been killed by her foster mother, so that the latter could have the girl living with her. In this case, paranoid delusions were used as a defensive mechanism for protecting the girl's ego. For many years, she had been overpowered by the Nazi world. Nevertheless, she survived. She had to explain away to herself that she had been deprived of all human prerogatives under the Nazis, that she had survived her mother, and that she was one of the few to be rescued. She tried to do this by assuming that she was a person of such tremendous importance that a plot proceeded on two continents for the privilege of possessing her as a foster child.

The other case was a ten year old boy whose extermination camp experiences took place during the ages from six to nine. The most vivid imagination is unable to paint the boy's agonies, and it is difficult to reconstruct the psychological mechanisms he used in order to survive. I asked him why he thought the SS had spared him. His answer was that he was something special, that even the SS recognized his importance for mankind, and that this was the reason he was spared. On the basis of this attitude his behavior became a problem. Its most obvious manifestation was the belief that everyone owed him immediate fulfillment of even his most extravagant desires, both because of his importance as a person, and because he had suffered so much that the world was under an obligation to compensate him for it.

THE fact that it is the Jewish individual who usually suffers more should not lead us to neglect the study of the psychological mechanisms at work in him, particularly since these mechanisms seem often to play into the hands of his adversaries.

Previous studies have usually concentrated on the characteristics and mentality of anti-Semites. It has been overlooked that the psychological mechanisms used by the anti-Semites have definite effects on the psychological pattern of the Jew. Moreover, insufficient consideration has been given to the fact that the Jews react to the anti-Semitic threat with psychological mechanisms fully as questionable, in terms of their efficacy and adequacy, as those used by the anti-Semite.

Clearly the situation of the concentration camp, which I have here analyzed at some length, is an extreme one. Nevertheless, I would say that the analysis has implications even for the less drastic conflicts we face here in America. If even in the concentration camp significant differences were found among the SS, people whom it was so easy to consider inhuman robots all bound to the same world, how much more important must it be to consider individual differences in the members of a free and heterogeneous society. We can learn much from these concentration camp experiences concerning our own person-to-person relationships, which to a great extent determine group behavior, and the function and hampering effect of stereotypes in congealing this behavior into a rigid, unintelligent pattern.

Let me offer a few general suggestions derived from reflections on such situations as the above:

First, we must guard ourselves—to the highest degree possible—from treating anti-Semites as if they were stereotypes and not individuals.

Second, "outrasoning" the anti-Semite, however satisfying to one's assumed or real intellectual abilities, is a double-edged weapon. To outrason another person is an aggressive act, creating as it does frustration and disequilibrium in the intellectually overpowered individual. Cooperative thinking must take the place of "talking down."

Third, Jews should guard themselves against projecting into anti-Semites their own conflicts, no matter how plausible this may seem. The mechanism of projection is one

of the more complex psychological devices by which the individual frees himself from conflicts by blaming others for attitudes he dislikes in himself. In this way he can reject such attitudes in *general*, which is in line with his moral obligation, and still need not rid *himself* of them. A comparatively simple example is provided by those Jews who accuse Gentiles of being envious of the Jews for their real or assumed accomplishments. Actually few Jews can help feeling envious of the freedom from restrictions which white Gentiles enjoy in our society. To face up to these restrictions would imply the realization that we are considered inferior, and this we resent. Instead many Jews transform the fact that they are considered inferior into the opposite; they think of themselves as superior, and accuse the Gentiles of being envious of the Jews, thus projecting their own envy on to others.

Fourthly, Jews should avoid creating a stereotype of the dangerous and all-powerful anti-Semite. It is a seductive escape from reality: too often it is an excuse for not taking a courageous stand against anti-Semites, or is a subtle flattery of one's own ego.

Finally, should we not develop a more flexible and intelligent approach in dealing with individuals and anti-Semitic masses? Would it not be sounder if each mass was broken down into its constituent individuals and each anti-Semite approached as a distinct individual, a case in himself, and his particular personality structure taken into account?

Jews, like all groups, have their differences from the rest of the population. But though Jews suffer from anti-Semitism, there is nothing *peculiar* about Jews except anti-Semitism. This may be difficult to accept, but it is true. And it is even more difficult for Jews to accept the fact that there is nothing peculiar about anti-Semites except their anti-Semitism.

WE HAVE become increasingly aware that many well-meant Jewish campaigns against anti-Semitism, because they are inadequately planned and unthoughtfully conducted, are likely to strengthen rather

than weaken it. Often, the methods used are based upon the stereotype of the anti-Semite, instead of a specific number of living, individual persons. They are "shot-gun" prescriptions. As a result, for some recipients the propaganda is too crude and simple, for others too sophisticated; in either case, the resistance of the anti-Semite is raised rather than lowered. Where the person finds the propaganda too crude, he feels that his intelligence has been under-rated; where he finds it too highbrow, he resents what he thinks is a calculated demonstration of his mental deficiencies. It must be stressed that nothing is so vexing as to be outreasoned. And to approach people with anti-Semitic tendencies on the benevolent assumption that they have fallen for anti-Semitic propaganda is—even if true—only to insult their native American shrewdness by implying that they have been made "suckers."

The irrationality and essential unwisdom of stereotyping the anti-Semite finds some of its most illuminating examples in anti-fascist and counter-anti-Semitic films made in the war period and after. It was presumed to be bold and realistic to depict the fascist or the anti-Semite as of colossal physical prowess, cunning, and will. The Nazi in Alfred Hitchcock's film *Lifeboat* was a flagrant instance, and not at all untypical. The murderer in *Crossfire* is cast in much the same mold; a powerful, confident, dominating personality among hesitant mediocrities. To stereotype the anti-Semite in this way may be understandable under the horrible pressures of the concentration camp; to do so in the United States, where both public sentiment and legal machinery are overwhelmingly against fascist violence, is difficult to condone. Moreover, it runs the risk of providing an escapist alibi for defeat in advance of struggle, and shows more interest in soothing the ego of the victim by exaggerating the danger and orally vilifying the supposedly invulnerable foe than in undertaking the less "heroic" choice of facing the facts of the particular situation at hand, analyzing it soberly, and devising precise and effective, though perhaps undramatic, means

to meet it concretely. Its end results are the emotional satisfaction of self-pity, and a flight from reality, not to speak of the encouragement given to the anti-Semites by the flattering strength of the conventional stereotype. Propaganda, however well-intentioned, that poses the superhuman brute against the eternally noble weakling will too often create a "boomerang" effect on the public mind.

And we might do well to review and analyze the way in which Jewish political journalism portrays anti-Semitic figures; usually they are without discrimination simply monsters. And often governmental figures who are not anti-Semitic at all, but simply supporters of measures politically counter to Jewish demands, appear in the conventional stereotype. To a man they are all Hitlers.

IF ANTI-SEMITISM is to be resolved effectively, the struggle must not be marshalled as a clash of stereotypes. Pitting one delusional system against its delusional counter-reaction precludes genuine constructive action and change. It only creates a vicious circle. This clash of stereotypes has already exaggerated, made more dangerous, and fixed in a more permanent mold, the excessive and inflamed nationalisms that obsess the modern world. In the clash of stereotypes—whether Russian and American, or Jewish and Arab—the real people disappear, and their place is taken by figments of the imagination; ideologies, hypnotized by the very images they have contrived, engage in merciless dis-

pute. Actual experience with the variety of human beings, which alone can guide appropriate behavior, is explained away or ignored. It is only when people can freely communicate with each other—as three-dimensional individuals—that understanding and trust can be secure. Any program that overlooks the individual in favor of the mass only helps to solidify prior prejudices and hardens the lines of conflict.

Anti-Semitism, we must realize, is basically an ego-defense against something that the person feels is alien to him. Only when the anti-Semite has accepted the Jew as a human being essentially like himself will he have reached the point where he can respond positively to factual information about Jews. As long as he goes on believing that Jews are a peculiar *type*, cunning in a way that he is not, all the factual evidence in the world will be interpreted as but another demonstration of how they try to outwit him.

Each step taken against anti-Semitism should, therefore, be carefully evaluated in terms of the specific situation and particular individuals involved. It must never rest upon a gross image of the anti-Semite as one bloated with ignorance and sadism. Jews must surrender their stereotype of the anti-Semite as a person too inferior to take pains with, too powerful to be fought against, or too radically corrupt to be approached as a normal human being. Anti-Semites are, for the most part, average people—like Jews. And that is most encouraging.